

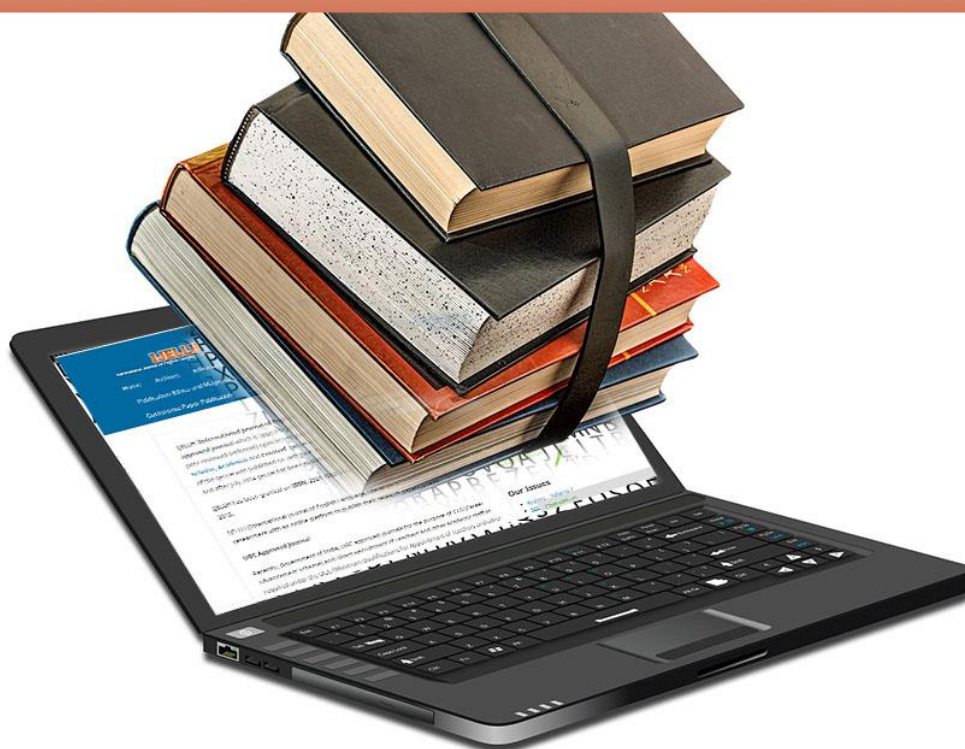
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### Supremacy of Religion and Caste in Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege*

#### Abstract

Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege* (2003) mirrors the contemporary society. People are being very conservative in spite of taking education. The novel portrays the fight between 'religious intolerance and liberal dissent'. In twelfth century reformer Basava's ideas and his views take the major depiction. Throughout the novel the fight for the religion and cultural supremacy is illustrated. The relevance can be observed by comparing 12<sup>th</sup> century and 21<sup>st</sup> century. The present paper deals with the depiction of supremacy of religion and caste in Githa Hariharan's *In Times of Siege*.

Key Words: Basava, Hindutva, Social hierarchy, Supremacy

## 1. Introduction

Das in his book *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism* (2005) quotes what Levi-Strauss says about myths, “Myths have no authors” (85). Myth reveals the belief or conviction of a particular group. Myth is a conventional unknown story and is different from other fables and legends. Das also quotes in the book what Murfin and Ray remark:

“Myths are different from legends, which detail the adventures of a human cultural hero (such as Robin Hood or Annie Oakley) and tend to be less focused on the supernatural. Whereas a legend may exaggerate—perhaps even wildly—the exploits of its hero, it is likely to be grounded in historical fact. Myths also differ from fables, which have a moral, didactic purpose and usually feature animal characters” (Das85).

*In Times of Siegestory* revolves round the 12<sup>th</sup> century reformer Basavanna. This deals with the current issue in today’s world about the religion, glorifying Hindutva and claiming the cultural superiority. Basavanna, a poet and reformer of the 12<sup>th</sup> century who fought for the castles society, raised his voice for inter-caste marriages and also brought new concepts which motivated many people in taking of their chores. He gave a new meaning to Hindutva.

The novel *The Times of Siege* of Githa Hariharan blends with 12<sup>th</sup> century poet and reformer Basava’s teachings and the contemporary people’s attitude who just glorifies the supremacy and legacy of Hindutva. The story goes like this:

“Basava and many of his followers took on the caste system, the iron net held society so firmly in place that reduced the common man and woman to hopeless captives. Thousands of these ordinary men and women took part in Basava’s egalitarian dream. The dream spread and took hold of people who had not been people before in Kalayana, people who had just been their functions; the makers of mirrors, the sinners of dead animals, the bearers of children. The people become a movement, the movement swelled and surged a

wave that threatened to swallow social conventions and religious rituals, staple diet of tradition” (ITS 61).

In the social set up, the social hierarchy, the upper class people never wanted to share their superior status with the other lower sect of the people, because they believed in the myth of “supremacy”. The strong belief on religion and caste comes under myth based society. Fundamentalism is a bane in the society because it comes in different forms, such as *casteism* in the form of religion. The story revolves around the legend of Basava, a fourteenth century revolutionary poet. There is an eternal battle, when the children of two Veerashaiva couple get married. Basava is known for his non-violence, but “His charisma was no longer enough to keep the moderates and the extremists among his followers together” (ITS 62).

Basava strived to bring casteless society and egalitarian society. He was the treasurer of Kalyana. Being quite extraordinary revolutionist overhauls the caste system. Unlike other finance minister, he was having great concern for the people of society.

“Basava gathered around him a unique congregation of mystics and social revolutionaries. Together they attempted a creative, courageous experiment a community that sought to exclude no one—not women, not the lowest, most ‘polluting’ castes. Poets, potters, reformers, washer men, philosophers, prostitutes, learned Brahmins, housewives, tanners, ferrymen—all were part of the brief burst of Kalyana’s glory. All were equal in that they were veerashaivas; warriors of Siva” (ITS 60).

He brought the concept of working together and says that the warriors of Siva do their work in union. They prepare mirrors, fishing nets, pots, leather sandals and transport them to the customers across the river. They also recite poetry, called *vachana* which is spoken and sung in people’s language. Basava and his supporters take on the caste system. They had believed that strong net that holds society so tightly in place. Thousands of normal people

take part in the democratic dream. They act as the producers of mirrors, the skimmers of lifeless animals and the holders of children. The citizens turn into society; that society becomes enlarged and rushes forward to consume the societal norms and spiritual ritual. “The king, Bijjala, an old friend of Basava’s, was under tremendous pressure from the pillars of society. Not surprisingly, the relationship between the king and his finance minister soured” (ITS 61).

The movement strikes when the off-springs of two veerashaiva couples get married. The bride is from Brahmin background and the bridegroom from the cobbler. The marriage is considered to be a catalyst. Basava disputes against the Brahminical domination in the name of religious conviction. King Bijjala is forced into joining accusation. The king gives a verdict for the fathers of the bride and the bridegroom. Then, he gives a death sentence to a young untouchable bridegroom, “Tied to horses, they were dragged through the streets of Kalayana; then what was left of them was beheaded” (ITS 62). There was carnage due to the marriage. Basava goes to the Sangam and is exceedingly disappointed. “Egalitarian ideas are bad enough, but a cobbler and Brahmin in the same bed? As well bomb Kalyana (and its vigorous trade, its prosperous temple and palace) out of existence!” (ITS 62).

Basava’s dream is not realized because his movement for equality for democracy is not remembered; social equality had become a mere dream. ‘*ItihasSuraksha Munch*’, does not understand the idea and the importance at all. Hence, the difficulty for Shiv “How is Shiv to explain Basava—his ideas, his times—to some bunch of hate crazy goons? Or to Meena with her Said and Asterix, or even to Rekha with her sound instinct for the safe position?” (ITS 63).

Shiv remembers his father; he knows his father only for fifteen years. Now, in his difficult situation, he draws strength from his father’s words:

“Freedom. Values. The common good. ‘You must mind the truth,’ . . . ‘If you settle for safety, if you choose to go along with whatever makes your life comfortable, truth will escape you completely. Shiva there is a kind of person who lives like this. He is called an opportunist” (ITS 82).

History is not very different from legends and Shiv’s father brings in the importance of it. The memory of history should be embedded in each life. Shiv’s father is delighted because Shiv has inherited his memory. He insists on Shiv reading history books “‘You must study history,’ . . . ‘You must know the past with all its riches and terrors, draw on the lessons of both in equal measure’” (ITS 82). Eventually, Shiv’s father is no longer his ideal and he “leaves with the storm” (ITS 191) and his father’s inheritance to Shiv is the “leap off the precipice” (ITS 194). Shiv accepts “. . . the value of the only heirloom he needs from the past, the right to know a thing in all the ways possible” (ITS 194). Githa Hariharan has used myths and has related fictional characters representing myths and legends.

In ITS, the myth is supremacy of caste. The different communal groups fighting for petty reasons and considering the social reformer as godly person and forming a separate caste looks ridiculous.

“The treasurer of Kalyana was a man called Basava. This man was no ordinary finance minister. He had too much passion and charisma, too much vision, to remain a mere government official. Basava was plagued by questions; he needed to examine and think and criticize everything that was traditional, sanctioned, as much as he needed to breathe. Basava gathered around him a unique congregation of mystics and social revolutionaries. Together they attempted a creative, courageous experiment a community that sought to exclude no one- not women, not the lowest, most ‘polluting’ castes. Poets, potters, reformers, washermen, philosophers, prostitutes, learned Brahmins, housewives, tanners,

ferryman – all were part of the brief burst of kalyana's glory. All were equal in that they were veerashivas; warriors of Siva" (ITS 60).

The above explanation of Basava clearly shows that he was man with rational ideas and also a follower of non-violence. "Thousands of these 'ordinary' men and women took part in Basava's egalitarian dream. The dream spread and took hold of people who had not been people before in Kalyana, people who had just been their functions" (ITS 61). This was the rational wave he set in the society. But, people who believed in Brahmanism did not digest it because of the strong belief on myth having superior complex of those people. The inter-caste marriage Basava initiates, marriage between Brahmin bride and son of cobbler as bridegroom became a reason to pour out the aggression of the people. Basava's ideology was not followed by his followers too and he dies in mysterious circumstances.

As it is explained by the novelist Githa Hariharan in the text itself says:

"Separating history and myth, pulling apart history and legend, deciding which chunks of history will keep the myth earth bound, which slivers of myth will cast light and insight, on dull historical fragments. The two have to be torn apart, their links disentangled, to see who is who then coaxed into embrace again to understand the composite reality. Approaching the whole, the heterogeneous truth that demands the coupling of conflicting narratives, requires the participation of one body" (ITS 87).

## 2. Conclusion:

People of today's world are not ready for rational thoughts. This attitude of people astonishes the rational thinkers of today; because of the strong belief on 'myth' people are not ready for change. Myths play a vital role in constructing people's mindset; and are deeply rooted in people's mind, until the people of the society come out the myth of caste system and religion society can't become casteless one.

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